Gob-smacked?

Consider three ancient British names:

Selgovae – people living in the Scottish borders
Coventina – a female goddess seen in sculptures on grottos near Hadrian's Wall
Gobannium – the Roman fort at Abergavenny in south Wales

Each has a widely repeated "Celtic" explanation that is unconvincing, but can we do better?

Every English speaker knows the words cave, cove, cup, gap, gape, gob, and gulf. Their core feature is to be an opening in some kind of structure. Less familiar are the words goaf and gobb 'empty space from which coal has been extracted' or 'bay in a barn', plus the delightful gove 'to stare stupidly'. The Oxford English Dictionary mostly traces these words back only to common Germanic and French.

PIE roots suggested in various places are **ghai-*/**gheu-* 'to gape, to yawn' and **geu-* 'to bend, cup, vessel', plus a potential confusion from **gab-* 'to show, to watch'. The Croatian etymology dictionary of Gluhak (1993:713-714) lists many potential cognates, extending outside Europe and into Asia (e.g. the Gobi desert), while discussing the district name *župa*, seen all over the Balkans and central Europe, administered by a *župan*. Gluhak considers extending the 'bend' PIE root into **gheu-p-* versus invoking a separate PIE **g(h)eup-* /**gheub-* 'cavity, pit' descended from Nostratic.

These words' etymologies can be tough to understand, because there are so many spelling conventions and because words change over time in a network as well as a tree pattern. The letters B, P, F, and V interchanged a lot, and vowels changed due to ablaut, in ways that linguists claim follow regular rules, but they are hard to apply when the language families involved are uncertain. One fairly reliable rule is that initial G in PIE often became K in Germanic, but C and G were not always used consistently in Roman writing.

It seems reasonable to accept that there was an early word **gheub-* 'cavity' and that Greek γυπη 'vulture's nest' (usually on rocky ledges and caves) was an early descendant, and cove and gob are later examples in English. The case for seeing that word in *Coventina* and *Selgovae* is strong, but what about *Gobannium*?

There is no inherent objection to accepting that an early deity *Gobannus* existed and that he led to words for 'smith' in Irish and Welsh, but it is worrying that neither Delamarre (2003) nor Matasovic (2009) can supply an etymology for the name. To be fair, Latin experts cannot explain *guberno* 'to steer' either. However, there seems to have been no proper discussion of Sanskrit *gopa* 'herdsman, guardian, king', Greek βαναυσος 'artisan', Semitic *ban* 'to construct'(much used in the Koran), and all those artisans who signed their brasswork BANNA. Maybe a word **ban* originated among pioneer metal workers in the Middle East whose counterparts further west had a protective deity who was *co-* 'with' them. All very interesting, but probably not relevant to Abergavenny.

Much has been written about Roman iron-making. Cleere (1981) summarised the archaeological evidence for Britain, which includes no mention of Abergavenny. Monmouth, 21 km away, was an active participant in the huge Roman iron industry of the Forest of Dean, and evidence has also been found near Cardiff and Caerwent. Most Roman forts contained a smithy, and *Gobannium* was probably no exception. And it is easy to imagine an enterprising native British blacksmith moving into the Usk valley. However, either way this would have been a small operation, highly unlikely to give a name to a fort.

Seven km away from the *Gobannium* Roman fort site, on the other side of a huge hill and a swampy river, an ironworks opened in 1788 at Blaenavon. It pioneered new technology,

unknown to the Romans, and drew on raw materials sourced fairly locally (as described here), which the Romans generally did not use in ironmaking: coal, limestone, and especially rich iron ores. The critical resource back then was timber, to make charcoal, but the hills of Monmouthshire had been deforested long before the Romans arrived.

On balance, it looks as if the *Gobannus* theory is romantic nonsense – not impossible, but waiting to be dethroned by a better idea. So let's ask why the Romans chose to build a fort at Abergavenny, whose geographical essence is to be the gateway to mid-Wales. In Scotland, *Gobannium* would be called a glen-blocker fort. A Roman road, number 62A of Margary (1973), largely followed by the modern A40, ran through Abergavenny, on its way from Caerleon, the Roman base near the Severn, towards Brecon, the gold mines of Pumpsaint, and the Irish Sea. This road largely follows the river Usk, staying on its north side.

Upstream of Abergavenny the road and the river go through a wide valley, flanked on either side by steep hills. Google 3D Maps show this beautifully. That valley was almost certainly a huge swamp in Roman times, judging by the modern flood-risk map, alluvial geology, and absence of any road crossing it all the way to Crickhowell. It is hard to guess how extensive the river marsh was in Roman times, not least because the hydrology has been altered by the Monmouthshire and Brecon canal, but there are obvious hints in the modern name Gilwern, which alludes to a marsh, and in the Victorian ferry from Llanwenarth to Govilon.

That gob/**gheub*- 'cavity' word sounds like a reasonable guess to describe this valley topography, but what about *–annium*? Here there is no simple answer. The PIE dictionary supplies lots of weak candidates , such as*an- 'on, along, over there' building words that might suit a transport route through. However, it seems most likely that the reference is to water, because so many words beginning with *an*- are "wet". Examples include Irish *an* or *en* 'water', Latin *anas* 'duck', German *Anger* 'water meadow' discussed under *Habitancum*, various river names discussed under *Anava*, a few cases where the *–ona* river ending shows up as *–ana*, such as in Δηουανα, and above all the explicit mention *anam paludem* in Endlicher's Glossary.

Maybe PIE **pen*- 'swamp', which led to the English word fen and probably contributed to *Pennocrucium*, suffered a Celtic-style loss of initial P to lead to some of these "wet" words, though it might be unwise to pronounce on the exact linguistic environment(s) of a Roman fort in what became a border county between Wales and England. Or else *Gobannium* could have started out as a typical two-element name **gheub*-**pen*-, whose two internal consonants simplified down to one. Then it got Latinised with a vaguely plural or collective ending. 'Marshy cavity' seems like an excellent description of environment of the Usk valley upstream of Abergavenny.